Abstract

This case study describes an online community-engaged research project with immigrants who speak different languages. The study was conducted in partnership with city government leadership, programs directed at immigrants, and university researchers. Together, the team aimed to learn from immigrants’ experiences to identify opportunities for changes in the community to promote immigrant integration and inclusion. While not originally intended to be conducted online, data collection began concurrent with the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic and was transitioned online to mitigate the spread of the virus. Ten focus groups were conducted through a videoconferencing platform, Zoom, in seven different languages, facilitated through professional interpreters. In this case study, we describe the process of developing and carrying out these multilingual focus groups, including collaborating with stakeholders to organize focus groups and recruit participants, building rapport with participants, working with interpreters in focus group facilitation online, and navigating ethical dilemmas. We describe lessons learned that we recommend others consider when designing and carrying out an online focus group study with immigrants who speak diverse languages.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students will be able to:

- Describe the benefits and drawbacks of conducting online focus groups, particularly with immigrant populations
- Explain ethical considerations involved in conducting research in multiple languages and working with interpreters
- Use technology appropriately to conduct ethical and rigorous online multilingual qualitative research
- Analyze practical considerations for engaging refugees and immigrants in qualitative research online

Project Overview and Context

Approximately 3.4% of the world’s population, or 258 million people, currently live outside their country of origin (United Nations, 2020). The United States has been a primary destination for many immigrants, with its immigrant population more than quadrupling in the past 50 years; a new immigrant arrives to the United States every 11 min (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; United Nations, 2020). This research was conducted in the northwestern US city of Anchorage, Alaska. Approximately 8% of Alaskans and 11% of Anchorage residents were born outside of the country, a 57% increase in its foreign-born population in the past 2 decades compared to a 14% increase in its US-born population over the same period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Anchorage has some of the most diverse neighborhoods and public schools in the United States (Farrell, 2018). One in five school-aged children in Anchorage lives in a household whose primary language is not English (Anchorage School District, 2021).
Before we go further, we want to define a couple of terms you will read throughout this case study. First, who is an immigrant? There are many pathways by which people come to a new country that vary by reasons for migration, such as seeking economic opportunity and/or fleeing persecution. People have a variety of legal terms that describe their immigration status, such as immigrant, asylee, or refugee. For the purposes of this case study, however, we use the term immigrant to refer to anyone who resides in a different country than where they were born and who intends to stay in this new country indefinitely. That is, immigrants do not include tourists or others visiting a different country for a set period of time. We also use the terms integration and inclusion. Integration is a multidirectional, multidimensional process in which both newcomers to a community (e.g., immigrants) and existing community members become full members of the community and work to shape the community. Although intended as a process that requires equitable contributions of everyone, the differential power that existing community members hold often places the onus on newcomers (e.g., immigrants) to adapt to existing community members rather than co-create and mutually shape their communities. Therefore, we use the term inclusion to acknowledge that existing community members need to create space, policies, and practices so that newcomers (e.g., immigrants) can engage fully in this process. Finally, language interpretation involves the conversion of one spoken language to another spoken language in real time.

Integration and inclusion of immigrants into their new communities is critical for the social and economic development of communities. For example, in Anchorage alone, immigrants contribute approximately $1.9 billion to the city’s gross domestic product (New American Economy, 2020). However, communities like Anchorage vary widely in their “contexts of reception” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2014), in some ways promoting inclusive immigration-related policies, making their community institutions accessible and receptive to immigrants’ needs, and supporting community members to socially include immigrants, while in other ways excluding immigrants. Moreover, immigrants are often treated and impacted differently in their new communities, depending on their own intersecting characteristics, such as country of origin, language fluency, and education level. It is, therefore, critical to examine in what ways communities both include and exclude immigrants, who is most impacted by these policies and practices, and how they are impacted, in order to develop more welcoming contexts of reception where everyone is able to thrive.

In 2014, the Municipality of Anchorage joined an initiative called Welcoming America in an endeavor to create a more inclusive community. Welcoming America has outlined what they call a “Welcoming Standard” or core guidelines for communities to adopt and implement policies, programs, and partnerships that “give communities the welcoming edge” (Welcoming America, 2016, p. 4). Based on these guidelines and through collaboration of many city stakeholders, Welcoming Anchorage sought to facilitate integration and inclusion through: equitable access (addressing barriers to services, such as language); civic engagement (supporting public engagement); connected, safe, and healthy communities (promoting public safety); education (providing “cradle to career” opportunities); and economic development and entrepreneurship (addressing barriers to career entry and promoting entrepreneurship opportunities). While these guidelines reflect the research and practice evidence for immigrant integration and inclusion available, little research has been conducted on what supports integration and inclusion and the processes by which these policies and
practices ultimately support immigrant integration and inclusion in Anchorage or elsewhere.

Therefore, Welcoming Anchorage stakeholders wanted to survey immigrants regarding their experiences navigating education, housing, economic development, and social places to identify facilitators and barriers to integration and inclusion in the municipality. That is where our story starts.

Section Summary

- Anchorage, Alaska is a US location that has had a significant increase in its immigrant population in recent history.
- Communities differ in how welcoming they are toward immigrants, which can keep immigrants from being fully integrated and included in their new homes.
- There are movements toward making communities more “welcoming”; however, there has been little research on what supports immigrant integration and inclusion via policies and processes.

Research Design

Welcoming Anchorage stakeholders sought consultation from researchers at the University of Alaska Anchorage on study design. This is central to community-engaged research: The project originates from a community ask and researchers are invited in to help formulate and answer the research questions rather than the research question being formulated solely by a researcher (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017; Rubin et al., 2012). Our project joined us—researchers, community stakeholders—as partners with unique skills, knowledge, and experience and helped us establish trust. Ultimately, this process enhanced the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the research.

While stakeholders originally approached the researchers about conducting a survey, it became clear to the researchers that a mixed-method study that combined quantitative data (via multilingual surveys) with qualitative data (via multilingual focus groups) would better meet the stated research goal of “exploring barriers and facilitators of immigrant inclusion and integration in Anchorage to identify possible areas of intervention.” We suggested to use a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Ivankova et al., 2006), meaning that we would first use a survey to gather data from a wide range of immigrant community residents as our community partners had intended, and then we would conduct a series of focus groups with immigrant community members to better explain or understand the results that arose from our survey findings. In that way, we could understand what these barriers and facilitators to integration and inclusion looked like in people’s daily lives. Moreover, we could understand if facilitators and barriers impacted people differently to target mechanisms of change effectively. In this case study, we focus on the qualitative part of the research study: multilingual focus groups via videoconference technology with immigrant community members.

Focus groups are organized discussions among a small group of people, usually between 5 and 12 participants, with one facilitator and a notetaker. They can be homogenous (including people who share similar characteristics), heterogeneous (including people with different characteristics), or both. A semi-
structured guide is used to structure the discussion. Conversation freely flows between the participants, with the facilitator keeping the discussion on topic, following up on unexpected information, and labeling key themes that arise. We chose to conduct focus groups, as opposed to other forms of data collection (such as individual interviews), for multiple reasons:

1. **Diversity.** Focus groups allowed us to feasibly include the experiences of more people in our sample to share a greater breadth of experiences.
2. **Richness.** Focus group participants build on each other’s stories and experiences as they discuss, perhaps adding information they would not have thought of individually.
3. **Frankness.** There is evidence that participants in focus groups are more likely to speak more openly with the facilitator, particularly when making critiques of institutions.
4. **Research Team Inclusion.** The notetakers for focus groups allowed multiple team members to shadow facilitators so that they could step into the role of facilitator for future groups, thereby allowing for a diverse set of us—both researchers and community stakeholders—to be involved in data collection.

In order to include as many diverse experiences as possible, we chose to hold focus groups in different languages via language interpreters. This allowed immigrants to participate in the groups in the languages they were most comfortable speaking while allowing research team members to gather data in a language they all had in common.

**Section Summary**

- Community-engaged research takes place when researchers and community members join to develop and carry out a research project.
- Focus groups are guided discussions among a group of people who are selected to participate based on their characteristics or experiences.
- Focus groups present many benefits, such as the incorporation of diverse participants and the collection of descriptive, forthright data from discussions.

**Research Practicalities**

We considered many practicalities when designing our study. Each consideration centered on using best practices to include a wide array of perspectives and experiences from immigrants in our community to provide the most complete picture we could of integration and inclusion so we could identify targets for intervention.

**Community Partnerships**

Central to the success of our project was our longstanding, trusting relationships with immigrant-focused organizations and immigrant community leaders over the years. Most of the people on our research team
are immigrants ourselves and speak multiple languages. We know from both personal and professional experience that sometimes studies can fall short of answering research questions well when the questions asked only come from researchers themselves. For example, sometimes questions are too complex or are not easily converted to another language. Therefore, from the beginning, we partnered with immigrant community leaders we already had existing relationships with to vet our study questions and phrasing. We also worked with these partners to introduce the study and invite people to participate. In all cases, these partners were deeply embedded in their communities and trusted. In many cases, they were health promoters who had wide networks. These immigrant community leaders were able to select the best date and time for the focus group they were involved with. They were encouraged to invite immigrants of diverse backgrounds and experiences in Anchorage, including people who had recently migrated and those who had lived in Anchorage for many decades; young, middle-aged, and older adults; and people with a variety of educational backgrounds, professions, and incomes.

Technology

In the past, focus groups were traditionally held in person. However, technology has recently allowed for focus groups to take place virtually. We chose to hold our focus groups via a videoconferencing platform, Zoom, to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Holding focus groups online promotes access by decreasing barriers to participation, such as no need for travel. However, online groups can also present unique barriers, including, but not limited to, access to technology and some technological literacy being required of participants, potential costs incurred with videoconferencing platforms for researchers, and possible challenges with establishing a group feeling of comfortability for participants to share sensitive information remotely. Nevertheless, videoconferencing for qualitative data collection has become increasingly feasible and acceptable for a wide array of populations and topics. Archibald et al. (2019) have found that researchers and participants alike report that Zoom facilitates rapport-building, is convenient, and is generally user-friendly. We also particularly appreciate Zoom’s settings that ensure data security. However, we would note that Zoom is not always the most practical platform for researchers, as it requires a subscription for group meetings that are longer than 40 min. Other platforms researchers may consider for focus groups are GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, RingCentral, and Microsoft Teams. Students and researchers may find their organization subscribes to a videoconferencing platform and offers them an account free of charge. We encourage them to explore options available to them, ensuring that the platform is user-friendly, provides tools they need to facilitate the group, and ensures the security of the information shared.

Language Interpretation

Our study also needed to be accessible linguistically. Therefore, we conducted a series of bilingual focus groups (English and another language) via an interpreter. We held groups in the seven most common languages spoken in the community, namely, Spanish, Samoan, Hmong, Tagalog, Korean, Arabic, and English. While it was not feasible to hold groups in every language spoken by immigrants, we chose languages that were often common across immigrants of diverse backgrounds. For example, Arabic is often
among the languages spoken by people in the Middle East and North Africa. We chose to organize the groups so that all individuals in a focus group spoke the same language, as having multiple interpreters in each group would have proved difficult for discussion. Interpretation presents opportunities and challenges, as it requires an interpreter to make meaning of what is said in one language and convey it in another language; often, no exact translation exists between languages and cultural context is accounted for; therefore, interpretation is interpretative (Bergen, 2018; Berman & Tyyskä, 2011; Edwards, 1998; Esposito, 2001; Temple, 2002; Vara & Patel, 2012; Williamson et al., 2011). We thus sought the services of local professional interpreters so that they were responsive to both the context and had the requisite training and experience for effective interpretation (for more, see MacKenzie, 2016). We strongly recommend that researchers, including those who are still students, only work with qualified, professional interpreters when conducting research in languages they are not fluent in. Just as researchers have specific training in research ethics and rigor, interpreters have specialized training in interpretation ethics and rigor. Unqualified interpreters may change the message or summarize what participants say, creating misunderstandings. They may also disclose information outside of the project, thus risking confidentiality.

Resources

While many resources were needed to conduct the study, we operated from a small budget. For some, our organizations supported our time involvement; some of us volunteered our time. The Municipality of Anchorage provided funding for interpretation and the University of Alaska Anchorage provided funding for gift card incentives for each participant. Technology for focus group facilitation, transcription, and analysis were also provided by the university. By pooling our resources, we were able to conduct this study with a very small budget.

Section Summary

• Partnering with trusted community members is a critical way of recruiting participants from diverse backgrounds into research studies.
• Conducting focus groups via videoconference can address many barriers to access, but it is important to remember that technology is unequally accessed and available.
• Professional interpreters who are local to the setting present an excellent way of making sure participants who speak a different language can be included.
• By working together, researchers and community stakeholders can pool resources from their institutions to conduct their community-engaged research projects.

Method in Action

This study was conceptualized in Fall 2019, before the world turned upside down. We embarked on this qualitative phase of the study in November 2020 in the midst of a surging COVID-19 pandemic that brought along with it strains to our healthcare system, changes in work practices for many and unemployment for some, online learning for most children in our school district, and the beginning murmurings of vaccination
Our methodological decisions should be understood in this context.

Getting Started

As previously mentioned, our project really began many years prior, as it was supported by the longstanding, trusting relationships we had with immigrant leaders and organizations in our community. At the outset of this phase of the project, we presented our focus group questions to these partners for their input on their phrasing. We also worked with them to develop a plan for recruiting immigrants to participate and got their feedback on the logistics of our focus groups. We then submitted our study plan to our Institutional Review Board for their review and approval.

Introducing the Project

We organized meetings to share about the preliminary results from the first phase of the project (quantitative findings from survey data) and to introduce the second phase of the project (the upcoming multilingual focus groups). Because we had asked survey participants if they would be interested in participating in a focus group at the conclusion of the survey, and those who indicated interest were asked to provide their contact information in a separate survey, we were able to invite participants who were interested in the focus groups to these meetings. We also invited other community stakeholders, including immigrant community leaders and people we had partnered with to develop the project. We held these meetings via the same videoconference technology that we planned to use for the focus groups, Zoom. We first introduced ourselves and took turns sharing about the project, its goals, and preliminary findings from the surveys. We also visualized the information we shared via Google Slides. Toward the end of the meeting, we introduced the next phase of the project, explained what focus groups are, and took questions from attendees to demystify the research. We told immigrant community leaders that we would be in touch with them to schedule focus groups if they remained interested in collaborating. Likewise, we told attendees that if they had indicated interest in participating in the focus groups, we would call them to invite them to a scheduled group.

Participant Recruitment

We then partnered with immigrant community leaders to recruit people to participate in the focus groups. We also invited people who had indicated that they were interested in participating in a focus group during the first phase of the study. While many community leaders were very busy doing health care outreach in response to the pandemic, they nonetheless were markedly efficient in recruiting, perhaps because they understood the value of the study due to our existing relationships with them. We attempted to make logistics simple, organizing each focus group around their schedules, usually in the evenings and on weekends. We also set up the videoconference technology with a phone option for participants without access to computers, tablets, or internet; provided a written description of the study via email for these immigrant community leaders to share; and set up interpretation services for the groups. We set a minimum (4) and maximum (8) recruitment goal for each group but expressed that we were flexible with how many participants attended. In all but one focus group, the target number of participants joined. Focus groups had between 3 and 7 participants, with
the average group having 5 participants. The openness of our inclusion criteria (any immigrant over the age of 18) also likely allowed for ease of recruitment. Fifty immigrants participated across the 10 focus groups. They ranged in age from 23 to 77 and had lived in Anchorage between 1 and 47 years. More women than men participated in the focus groups, but men were still represented across nearly all focus groups.

**Data Collection**

We organized 10 focus groups around the most commonly spoken languages in Anchorage over a 2-month period: Spanish, Samoan, Hmong, Tagalog, Korean, Arabic, and English. Each focus group was scheduled for 2 hr and was held on Zoom with options to join via computer, tablet, or telephone. Taking seriously ethical concerns of confidentiality and anonymity, participants were encouraged to join the group from a private space and had the option of having their cameras on or off. Zoom was set up to require the host to admit participants via a waiting room. Participants also were instructed to choose a pseudonym as they came into the group to protect their identities and the team helped participants change their screen name to their pseudonym. These names were used throughout groups and any quotes publicly shared were attributed to these pseudonyms so participants could recognize their words while having their confidentiality maintained, a strategy our team has found helpful in the past (e.g., Buckingham & Vargas-Garcia, 2018).

**Rapport Building**

We chatted casually among participants while waiting for everyone to join, typically opening the Zoom meeting 10 minutes before the set start time, and formally starting the group about 20 minutes later. This part of the group was not audio recorded. The immigrant community leader who helped to organize the group often joined a bit early, which facilitated introductions and put participants at ease. As participants came into the rooms, we introduced them to the facilitator, notetaker, and interpreter. Interpretation sometimes helped to facilitate these casual conversations, but sometimes the conversations were solely in the participants’ preferred languages as they caught up with each other or got to know each other for the first time. This time served as an important “ice breaker” since the usual chatting over refreshments to build rapport was not possible via Zoom (Gray et al., 2020). Most participants joined via videoconference rather than phone and thus were able to see one another. This relaxed, informal time appeared to put participants at ease while also allowing for late arrivals before we started the formal group.

**Consent**

As we started the group, we went over the study, its potential benefits and risks, and we provided participants an opportunity to ask questions. We paused every couple of sentences throughout our description to allow time for language interpretation. We made sure participants had the capacity to understand the implications of participating and potential future impacts, that participation was voluntary, and that they could discontinue participation at any point without penalty. For example, participants could receive the gift card incentive regardless of how much they participated. We also went over focus group expectations:
• Please make sure that you are in a private space where no one else can hear what we say.
• Please do not share what people say in this group outside of here without their permission. This kind of conversation can only work if everyone here shares their experiences openly and agrees to respect the privacy of others.
• There are no wrong answers. If your point of view is different from another participant, please share it with the group. We need to hear it!
• Please do not have side conversations. We want to hear from all of you. If there is something you would like to share while someone else is speaking, you can write it in the chat window so that you do not forget it.
• It is my role to direct our conversation, so I may ask us to move to different topics after a while. We have a limited amount of time together, and I want to respect your time. If you would like to chat with each other or me after our conversation, I will be glad to stay.

We had previously received permission from our Institutional Review Board to not have written informed consent. Instead, we went over the study information aloud with potential participants and participants gave their consent to participate orally. This approach allowed for people to participate anonymously, was responsive to cultural differences in consenting practices, addressed the diversity in levels of literacy, and avoided the need for an electronic paper trail that could pose risks to confidentiality and be burdensome for participants without technological literacy or resources. Importantly, we did not begin the audio recording until participants had indicated that they understood what they were being asked to do and were still interested in participating. When we then started the audio recording, participants were asked to state that they consented to participating in the research with their pseudonym. This both provided a record of their consent and it allowed for us to link voices to pseudonyms for subsequent transcription.

Facilitation

We first held focus groups with English-speaking participants, with the research team member most experienced with facilitating focus groups on electronic platforms facilitating the first group, another person taking notes and observing to learn to facilitate the groups, and a third person later listened to the audio for transcription purposes (a process not described in this case study). Facilitation was then transitioned to others as they were trained. This allowed all team members to build their focus group facilitation skills and helped us ensure that the data collected was not directly resultant from one researcher’s proclivities.

Synchronous Language Interpretation

When we transitioned to focus groups in other languages, we followed Araújo-Lane (2014) CIFE acronym to ensure effective language interpretation in the focus groups: Confidentiality (interpreters keep everything private), I (first-person) language (interpreters serve as the voice of the speakers, stating what is said in first-person language), Flow (interpreters work alongside facilitators to manage the pace of the discussion, signaling when a pause is needed for interpretation), and Everything (interpreters state everything that occurs during the focus group without filtering or summarizing any content, including side conversations).
Semi-Structured Discussion

We started each discussion by inviting participants to reflect on their migration to Anchorage and their first experiences in the community, and changes in experiences over time. We then inquired about their experiences in employment, accessing community services—such as the public school system, police, judicial system, government, and healthcare system—and interacting with US-born people in Anchorage.

We used a semi-structured focus group guide, meaning that we strove to ask the same broad questions to everyone and then we used follow-up probes to guide the group.

For example, the bolded questions below are ones we aimed to ask in each focus group. The other questions we asked based on the responses of the group.

- **To begin, I would like you to think back to when you first moved to Anchorage. Think about what you were expecting, what you were hoping for, what you were worried about. What did you imagine?**
- **Can you remember some of your first experiences?** What was exciting? What was easy? What was challenging? Did your experiences match up with what you expected?
- **Have your experiences in Anchorage changed since you first arrived?** What has been easier over time? How come it became easier?
- **Are you working? What has your experience been like finding work in Anchorage?** Has anything gotten in the way of you finding work in Anchorage? Could you find work in your area of training? What helped you find work in your area of training? What kept you from finding work in your area of training? What has your experience been like working in Anchorage? Do you like your job? How come? What are your relationships with your co-workers like? Do you feel included at work? What makes you feel included? What makes you feel excluded?
- **People have told us that it is difficult to access some community places in Anchorage. Places like recreation centers, libraries, parks, places of education, places of worship, and community organizations. What challenges have you had accessing community places?** Have you felt unwelcome at any community place? How has not being able to access [community place] impacted you?
- **Now we would like to talk about your general experience with services in Anchorage.**
- **What have your experiences been with the public-school system?** How comfortable do you feel interacting with public schools? How come? What might improve your experience?
- **What have your experiences been with the police?** How comfortable do you feel interacting with the police? How come? What might improve your experience?
- **What have your experiences been with the judicial system?** How comfortable do you feel interacting with the judicial system? How come? What might improve your experience?
- **What have your experiences been with the government?** How comfortable do you feel interacting with the government? How come? What might improve your experience?
- **What have your experiences been with the medical system?** How comfortable do you feel
interacting with the medical system? How come? What might improve your experience? Do you have any challenges accessing health care? What are you doing to overcome these challenges? Has your access to care been impacted by COVID-19?

- What have been your experiences interacting with people who were born in the United States? What negative experiences have you had? What positive experiences have you had? Have you felt encouraged to interact with people born in the United States? How come? Who or what encouraged you?

We ended with two broad questions:

- Is there anything that you wish Anchorage would have done to improve your experience?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in Anchorage?

This allowed participants to comment on important experiences and perspectives that we had not directly prompted with our original questions. For example, one participant spoke about their own advocacy to change oppressive systems. Finally, participants were asked to share demographic information orally. Having a semi-structured focus group guide allowed us to transition between topics and follow-up on points participants raised (Brodsky et al., 2017). By keeping data oral, we removed participation barriers that may have arisen from other forms of data collection.

**Challenges and Solutions**

The focus groups flowed well, and participants indicated that they had gotten a lot out of the conversation. We agreed that the data were rich and lent important insights. However, we did run into difficulties we had to navigate along the way:

First, as we worked with interpreters in most groups and participants had differing levels of fluency in English, we had to be careful to make sure that all that was said in both English and the other language was always interpreted so everyone was aware of what was said. That meant sometimes reminding bilingual group members to pause for language interpretation and asking participants with long stories to pause multiple times for language interpretation. Working with skilled, professional interpreters helped us navigate these dynamics (Edwards, 1998).

Second, by allowing participants to join from their own locations, we relinquished some control (Gray et al., 2020). Allowing participants to join via phone and internet with their cameras off made participation more anonymous and comfortable for some but came with the cost of potential limits to confidentiality. While we encouraged participants to join from private locations, we could not ensure that they did so. The flexibility of videoconference also resulted in participants joining late or having to step away for a time as they cared for others in their homes. Our best ways of addressing these challenges were: having a waiting room set up so the facilitator could choose when to admit someone new, having multiple trained team members present so a private “break-out room” could be established to consent a new participant who joined late, and establishing ground rules/expectations with all participants.
Third, the technology itself and diverse levels of technological literacy presented both opportunities and challenges (Gray et al., 2020). We tried to increase participants’ comfort level with the videoconferencing platform, Zoom, by orienting them to its features at the beginning of the group and providing reminders throughout. We also worked to replicate important aspects of in-person focus groups as much as we could using this technology. For example, we named nonverbal behavior of participants—both from their videos (e.g., “I see you are nodding”) and from their “reactions” on Zoom (e.g., “I see that you gave that a thumbs up.”). We gave participants the option of using the chat window—much like written notes someone might write on a notepad during an in-person group—and would read out what was publicly shared during the group and keep record of anything shared privately with the facilitators only. We also specifically invited people who were quieter to share by using their pseudonym, which was especially important for those joining via telephone as it can be difficult to enter into a discussion without being able to see the nonverbal behaviors of other participants. Finally, the facilitator could mute participants or move them into a break-out room to address any concerns.

Finally, time presented a challenge. Because most focus groups were multilingual, hence involving interpretation, we had to remain cognizant of the time needed to cover all topics while staying within the 2-hr block for our discussion. This sometimes meant needing to move the group along, requiring skillful facilitation to make sure everyone was included.

Section Summary

- Working with existing trusted community partners can help to recruit participants for a study who may be hard to reach virtually when in-person outreach and recruitment are not ethical or feasible.
- When conducting multilingual focus groups over videoconference technology, researchers must take care to replicate the rapport-building, consenting, engagement, confidentiality, discussion facilitation, and note-taking practices that are present for in-person focus groups.
- Researchers must also make an effort to address unique barriers to participation that arise due to technology.

Practical Lessons Learned

We have learned many lessons through conducting this community-engaged research project in the middle of a pandemic! Here are key ingredients to this type of work:

- **Organization.** Develop a system for keeping everyone organized and maintain that system throughout the research process.
- **Communication.** Always communicate slightly more than you think is needed to make sure everyone stays on the same page. That includes researchers, stakeholders, participants, and others. Holding meetings and sharing results throughout is one way of keeping everyone informed. Document what has been discussed and maintain records through the organizational system.
- **Preparation.** Make sure everyone has adequate training and support. Consider accessibility from
the beginning and make plans to prevent any barriers to access.

- **Balance.** Balance rigor with feasibility. While there are certain aspects of study methods that cannot be compromised without worrying about the trustworthiness of the results, researchers need to consider what is most ethical and appropriate for their populations. They can determine this by collaborating with community stakeholders.

- **Flexibility.** In order to address ever-changing situations that occur during a pandemic, everyone must be flexible with one another. Data collection methods may need to change, people may need to step away due to other time demands, and other structures may need to shift. By remaining flexible while keeping the big picture goals in mind, a meaningful study can be accomplished.

**Conclusion**

Community-engaged research, particularly with immigrants who may face barriers to participation, can be challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic introduces more complexities, as best practices for this type of research via in-person engagement are often not ethical due to the risk of potentially exposing participants to a virus. Using online multilingual focus groups provides an opportunity to reach people whose experiences may not have been otherwise heard. The strength of our study comes from partnerships within the immigrant community and leveraging of the local government’s willingness to build a more inclusive and integrated community. Time put into cultivating trusting relationships helps to create a successful and useful research project. This research process taught us valuable lessons, such as the need to adapt flexibly during a pandemic, especially with the use and access to videoconferencing technology and participating in research from home settings. It also taught us how to work effectively with language interpreters to promote inclusion of a diverse group of immigrants in our study. Your approach will depend on what you want to achieve and prioritize. For us, it was more important to collaborate and make sure that diverse community members were fully involved than it was to conduct the research as quickly as possible. Lastly, having co-leadership to organize a diverse team, communicate effectively, exercise patience, and adapt to changing circumstances is important to succeed in online, community-engaged research.

**Classroom Discussion Questions**

1. At what points is it beneficial to engage stakeholders in community-engaged research? How does this add value to the process?
2. Technology can be both a barrier and facilitator for participant inclusion. What roles did technology play in this case study? What would you have done differently?
3. Why did the researchers decide to hold focus groups in multiple languages using professional interpreters?

**Further Reading**

for qualitative data collection: Perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–8. 10.1177/1609406919874596


**Web Resources**

- For more about creating more welcoming, inclusive, and integrated communities:
  - Welcoming America: [https://welcomingamerica.org/](https://welcomingamerica.org/)
  - World Education Service’s Skilled Immigrant Integration Program: [https://www.wes.org/partners/global-talent-bridge/skilled-immigrant-integration-project/](https://www.wes.org/partners/global-talent-bridge/skilled-immigrant-integration-project/)

- For more about community-engaged research and action:
  - Community Psychology: [https://www.communitypsychology.com/](https://www.communitypsychology.com/)
  - Community Toolbox: [https://ctb.ku.edu/en](https://ctb.ku.edu/en)

- For more about the project and its findings:

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